

Could we imagine an alternate scenario that would encourage medievalists to be theorists too, to understand and make use of a wide range of critical methods? While training medievalists to become feminist literary critics could we also begin forming feminist text editors, feminist translators and even feminist philologists? If we do not yet know exactly what all these terms might mean, could we at least begin considering some options for change?

What about developing an option whereby students could undertake intensive study of medieval languages during the summer months? Once having made the decision to pursue medieval studies, graduate students could spend a summer learning the necessary languages. This would leave more time, during the academic year, for taking courses in literature, theory, and interdisciplinary topics in medieval studies. It might also free-up feminist scholars now burdened with teaching medieval languages to focus on literature and incorporate theory more fully in the classroom. If such a language program were to exist, it should be supported by scholarship funds.

Sorely needed is a course on Problems and Methods in medieval literature that would offer varying theoretical approaches to the medieval literary text. A variety of professors could present their viewpoints on problems unique to medieval studies. A course like this could open dialogue between students and professors and perhaps even between professors of opposing ideological camps. Too often medievalists deny the relevance of literary theory, making their own approach appear natural and objective.

A methods course would open possibilities for potential feminists. We had no intention of becoming feminists when we entered medieval studies. In fact, we avoided taking classes with that "crazy medieval feminist woman" until a course in twentieth century literary theory made us question the ideas of our medieval professors who laughed every time the issue of women was brought up in class. "Feminism has no place in medieval studies," they kept telling us. We believed them. We did not even think of questioning them. Our access to feminism was cut off until the very end of our studies. A team-taught course in Problems and Methods could have exposed us to feminist studies as a viable option within medieval studies. At the very least, we might have discovered a lot earlier that this crazy woman wasn't so crazy after all. In the last year of our doctorate program, we have discovered the kind of intellectual challenge and dialogue missing from our previous studies. We are now working with that crazy woman and another non-feminist but very open-minded professor, each from a different department. Not until now did we dare suspect that a dialogue could exist between these two professors. The combination of their diverse approaches has added a new depth to our studies. From the way the Aristotles and Sir Philologloats tell it, one could never have imagined a feminist and non-feminist cooperating, actually talking and exchanging ideas. And yet it does happen.

REPORT FROM CORNELL MEDIEVAL STUDIES PROGRAM  
Submitted by Disa Gambera and Wendy Peek

First, a brief overview. Cornell University offers both MA and PhD degrees in Medieval Studies. Most of the 20-odd students in the program have their major concentration in literary studies. The majority of the graduate students are funded by teaching in the Freshman Seminar Program, a Cornell-wide program which uses composition and close textual analysis to train students in



academic expository prose. The freshman courses offered in Medieval Studies, all of which are taught by graduate students, include: The Literature of Chivalry; Aspects of Medieval Culture; and Legend, Fantasy and Vision. The vast majority of students in the Medieval Studies Program are women. Until three years ago, only one faculty member in Medieval Studies was female. Now we have two.

Largely because of the efforts of female graduate students and the leadership of a male professor sympathetic to feminist ideas and goals, graduate students in the last few years have succeeded--to some degree--in restructuring the program to suit their needs and interests. In the past, students had little say in choosing the courses they took and in determining what was taught in those courses. The faculty exercised similar control over the types of courses graduate students taught and the texts they used in those courses. Students, both female and male, interested in pursuing feminist interpretations encountered harsh opposition, and some female students found it easier to leave the program than to face condescending disapproval of their work.

This situation started changing in 1987, with the advent of a new program director. The all-female group of graduate students who were teaching the freshman seminars began to voice dissatisfaction with the courses offered to freshmen in the Medieval Studies Program. The course titles and descriptions, as listed in the Freshman Seminar Handbook, promised freshman a (male) fantasy world, replete with dashing knights, vertiginous virgins, and provoking dwarves. When we attempted to introduce feminist readings into the classroom, our students bemoaned our false perversity, citing the 'Truth in Advertising' statutes. Our view then was, that if we couldn't change our students' minds, at least we could change our course offerings.

Our first move toward self-empowerment was to hold a TA meeting without our faculty adviser present, a meeting referred to by one faculty member, jokingly (?), as a "cabal." At this historic convocation, we discussed ways of reinvigorating the freshman curriculum in Medieval Studies, brainstorming about courses we would like to teach and that would also interest freshmen. We expressed a desire that the more experienced graduate students teach courses that utilized the knowledge they had gained from their own research projects. After the meeting, we met with our advisor and presented the course proposals that we had written up. Our advisor seemed impressed with our organization and commitment, and he began to work with us, submitting suggestions to the group and asking for our input. This cabal, then, resulted in a major reorganization of the curriculum. In "Aspects of Medieval Culture" course, one of the new course offerings, senior graduate students create their own courses. Under the auspices of "Aspects," one of us teaches a course on frame narratives, which focuses on Chaucer and Boccaccio. She supplements these medieval works with The Women's Decameron, a twentieth-century Soviet novel by dissident feminist, Julia Voznesenskaya. Another student will be teaching a course in the spring on medieval travel literature. Other courses taught this semester include "Birds and Beasts of the Middle Ages," "Four Courtly Societies," and "Heroes and Monsters."

One result of the changes in the courses we teach is a change in the courses we take: the influence of graduate students with feminist concerns has reached even into the arcane corners of medieval Latin literature. In a graduate seminar last year students brought Luce Irigaray's work on Plato's cave into discussions of Neo-platonism and medieval interpretations of the



Timaeus. In addition, the letters of Abelard provided fertile ground for speculation about his tendency to appropriate the female voice. As a finale, the predominantly female class presented the male professor with a Latin charter conferring honorary womanhood upon him.

All of this is not to suggest that the Cornell Medieval Studies Program has become a paradise for feminists. If your interests do not lie in Medieval French or Italian, there are no female faculty members to work with. Although Cornell has many prominent feminists (Mary Jacobus, Biddy Martin, Nelly Furman) who encourage feminist medievalists, none of them is trained in mastering the idiosyncrasies of medieval literature. In addition, the strong philological bent of the program, requiring reading ability in at least four or five languages, limits the number of courses one can take outside of Medieval Studies.

Nevertheless, the changes in the past few years have made a considerable difference; graduate students entering the program have much more control over their course of study. As a result, they have more enthusiasm both for the courses they take and those they teach. They even seem--dare we say--happy.

Please feel free to contribute to this discussion and send further comments to Jane Burns.

#### NOTES AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Happy New Year to All!

The Medieval Feminist Newsletter would like to thank the anonymous donor to the newsletter. We can always use extra donations and appreciate this person's generosity.

Back issues of MFN: A xerox packet of back issues of MFN (numbers 1-7, spring '86-spring '89) is now available for \$15. from E. Jane Burns, Department of Romance Languages, CB3170, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 27599-3170. Please make checks payable to The Medieval Feminist Newsletter. Allow one month for shipping and handling.

Kalamazoo:

The following sessions will be sponsored by MFN at the Medieval Institute Meetings in Kalamazoo this year:

1. Literature, History, Feminism: A Dialogue (Linda Lomperis)
2. Silence and Women in the Middle Ages (Peggy McCracken)
3. Constructing Women in the Past--Then and Now--Problems of Historiography, Theory and Discipline (Carolyn B. Anderson)
4. Representations of Motherhood: History, Image, Fiction (Roberta Krueger)